Hybrid heron, Louisiana heron crossed with snowy heron.

Louisiana heron, covering her eggs.

Snowy herons, producers of the aigrettes of commerce.

Louisiana Will Have World's Largest Zoo

By HARRY H. DUNN

STRETCHING for approximately seventy-five miles along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and extending inland an average width of seven miles, an area of more than 500 square miles, the largest zoological garden in the world is being established within the boundaries of the United States, by the state of Louisiana. More than three-fifths of this great tract, larger even than the "Elephant Park" planned by England in the heart of equatorial Africa, is now owned by Louisiana under permanent law that it never be sold or leased or used for any purpose whatsoever but refuge for the wild things of the earth and air, that no firearms of any kind, save those belonging to the wardens, be allowed upon it, and that it at all times be open to ornithologists, naturalists, and nature photographers.

On these lands, all so far given to the state made famous by Audubon, all the many varieties of bird life indigenous to Louisiana are now living and increasing. On them the snowy heron, driven to the verge of extinction by the plume hunters, who took the beautiful aigrettes at the price of the bird's life, have returned to breed by thousands. The roseate spoonbill, once thought to be on its way to join the great auk and the Labrador duck in extinction, breeds there in annually increasing numbers, while during the migratory season—since this great zoo lies directly under the main lanes of Mississippi Valley migration—the photographer and student are compelled to drive the Canada and snow and blue-fronted geese and the mallards and teal and pintails from his path as he walks on Avery Island, or Marsh Island, or over the huge tract given to the state by the Rockefeller Foundation.

The present tract is administered by the Louisiana State Department of Conservation, which had the greater part of it for five years under probation, demonstrating to the donors that these islands and prairies and bays and bayous and marshes could be maintained free and safe sanctuaries for the wild life of the whole Mississippi Valley. At the end of those five years—this year these tracts are being turned over to the state of Louisiana, through the state department of conservation, to be the property of the state forever. The Louisiana legislature recently passed an act enabling the state to accept these tracts, and no sooner was this act a law than Governor John M. Parker, commissioner of conservation, M. L. Alexander, and Edward A. McIlhenny, who, nearly thirty years ago, originated the idea of the great zoo, and was the first to give land to the state for this purpose, began work on a project to obtain the remaining land to make up the solid front of 75 miles on the Gulf of Mexico.

M. L. Alexander (left), commissioner of the Louisiana State Department of Conservation, discussing an oyster with Dr. George W. Fields, oyster expert of the United States Fisheries Bureau. Mr. Alexander has complete charge of the world's largest zoo.

Lands in the zoo today consist of 13,000 acres, valued at $130,000 and given to the state by Charles Willis Ward and Edward A. McIlhenny, in 1911; 78,985 acres, valued at $780,000, given by the Russell Sage Foundation, as the result of efforts by Mr. McIlhenny, and 88,247 acres valued at $660,000, given by the Rockefeller Foundation. All these foundation gifts, as has been intimated above, were made five years ago. Thus, there is a total of 180,232 acres, valued at $1,570,000 now in the zoo.

The lands to be acquired consist of two strips, one of 43,000 acres, in Vermilion Parish, between the Russell Sage and Rockefeller Foundation gifts, and valued at $675,000, and the other of 86,000 acres lying between the Ward-McIlhenny gift and the Rockefeller Foundation gift, and valued at $300,000. As will be seen, these strips separate the present tracts, and prevent their being welded into one whole zoo. Negotiations have progressed so far and so favorably with the owners that the Louisiana state authorities are convinced they will be in possession of the lands within ten months, if not before that time.

Persons whose idea of a zoo pictures a number of huge cages filled with animals and birds would be disappointed in coming to this, the greatest zoo in the world, for there is not a vestige of a fence, far from a cage and not a house appears save at rare intervals the cottage of a warden, or the landing place of some of the armed fleet of motor boats which day and night patrol the waters of Vermilion, Cameron and Iberia parishes, through which the great wild life refuge extends. The combined tracts will take in at least three bays, three large lakes and several small ones, and a score of islands in the great marsh. They include salt water, out to the three-mile limit of Uncle Sam's domain; salt marsh lands, fresh-water marsh lands, fresh-water lakes and bayous and rivers; oak-covered islands, and cypress-covered swamps.

E. A. McILHENNY,
Originator of the wild life refuge idea.

On these lands today lives every variety of animal life known to Louisiana, from the black bear of the canebrakes to the muskrat of the river banks, and from the bald-headed eagle of the oak-covered islands to the humming bird of myriad hues flittering above the wild roses on the upland. To them in winter comes every variety of bird that migrates into or through the United States, from the tiny swallows to the huge and rare swans. Albatrosses, boobies and frigate birds have been seen on Marsh Island, which the Russell Sage Foundation gave to Louisiana, and the mysterious Anhinga, or snake bird, believed to be the most direct of all bird descendants of the flying reptiles, nests in safety, fearless of man, on the Avery Island reserve.

And it all began nearly 30 years ago when Mr. McIlhenny, then a boy on his father's large estate at Avery Island, noted the visits of the plume hunters in their great, slow-moving luggers, the decks covered with the skins of slain birds. He connected these plume hunters with the disappearance of the roseate spoonbills, the snowy herons, the American egrets, and other birds from the swamps and marshes whereon they once nested in myriads.

Selecting Willow Pond at Avery Island as a place where they would be safe, he hunted the swamps for several days until he found two nests of the snowy heron, that beautiful bird from the nesting female of which are torn the aigrettes for milady's headgear. These he reared in a large cage on the pond, and kept them tame and familiar until the time for the migration. The next year they returned, and nested, and so on ever since, flying southward to Central America and back in the spring, until today there are at least 2,500 pairs nesting on Willow Pond alone, and probably as many more pairs scattered through the remainder of the reserve.

Gradually other birds came to nest at Willow Pond, until the greatest bird colony in the world was built up there, and became, with the rising in Louisiana of men who foresaw the fate of all American wild life if its slaughter were not checked, the nucleus of the 500 square miles of natural zoological garden now being arranged in that state. A railroad runs to the border of this vast area at one point, and neither it nor any other railroad will ever be allowed to touch it anywhere else. The proposed route of the Intercoastal Canal runs for some distance along its inland boundary, and Calcaiseu Lake lies close to its western line. All these furnish natural navigable waterways by which the great zoo may be patrolled. It is estimated that, in addition to the four patrol motor boats each armed with a one-pound rifle and manned by four wardens in addition to the crew, some 150 land wardens, and five or six automobiles will be required to safeguard the zoo, more guardians being required as the wild life increases and the temptation to slaughter becomes greater.

Already there have been pitched battles between the agents of the state department of conservation and poachers, the last of which, no later than last year, was a gun fight of more than half a day between one warden and six poachers.

These Texas Rangers of the swamp, on foot, mounted on horses, riding in motor cars and clinging to the deck of a 40-foot motor boat in the rough waters of the gulf, have driven virtually every poacher from the thousands of acres comprised in the wild life refuges. Squatters, few in number, were bought off, if they had titles, or compelled to quit the state lands if they had no right to them while a few were taken into the organization as wardens, and have done efficient work there. Thus the only bars on the cage of the world's largest and most densely populated zoo will be the couple of hundred agents of the department of conservation, and its only boundaries the streams and the imaginary lines which mark its bounds on paper. There is no physical reason why the inhabitants of this bird and animal paradise should not spread from it throughout the wilder parts of Louisiana.

Picture to yourself, if you can, a place of pleasant lands, flowing streams, quiet lakes, shallow brooks, deep rivers, wide bays, all fringed and bordered and dotted with groves of oak and cypress and tulip and bamboo, meadows covered with lush grasses, hills groved with oaks that were tremendous trees when Columbus was a child in Genoa, and lay it all down in the heart of the mystic, legend-haunted country of Evangeline and Gabriel, and you will have some idea of the physical aspect of this, *your* forever free zoo. Fill it with more birds and animals than you can imagine, and you will get some faint idea of the wilderness Audubon saw when he sketched his birds.

Walk with me on Hell-Hole Bank, on Marsh Island, and literally shove the wild geese out of your way, while one hundred yards outside the unmarked boundary of this sanctuary, you could not approach within a thousand feet of the flock. Step with me into a flat-bottomed john-boat and pole through the trees where 20,000 herons are nesting, feeding their young or covering their eggs with as little attention to you and me and the click of the camera as they pay to the protected herds of deer that wander to their pool to drink.

Walk through the oaks on the knolls and hear a choir of bird voices raised in an everlasting song of thankfulness for freedom from all danger, save that of the wandering snake, or the predatory rat. Then think what all this means to the people of this America who are to come after us, when the bird life of the nation has been reduced to nothing, as the biologists tell us it will be in these United States within the next twenty years at the present rate of slaughter. How much more worth while it is now to expend the money of the state and of the United States on such a vast protected home for the living wild life, than on plate glass cases for the dead animals and birds that once flourished so bountifully on this continent!